



UNITED STATES GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

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May 21, 1982

COMMUNITY AND ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT DIVISION

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The Honorable Jesse Helms
Chairman, Committee on Agriculture,
Nutrition, and Forestry
United States Senate

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Dear Mr. Chairman:

Subject: Food Stamp Program Application Processing
Time (GAO/CED-82-87)

On April 8, 1982, you asked us to supplement our March 1982 report 1/ to you on expedited service in the Food Stamp Program by providing any information readily available on how long States take to process nonexpedited service (regular) cases. You also asked whether processing time for these cases would be shortened if expedited service were eliminated.

Processing time is the period between when a household makes application for food assistance and when a local food stamp agency issues or denies food stamp benefits to that household. The Food Stamp Act of 1977 requires that, for regular cases, benefits be issued not later than 30 calendar days after an application is submitted. Households can receive benefits within 3 working days (expedited service) if they have no net monthly income or are considered destitute as defined by the Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service.

The Service does not require State and local food stamp agencies to collect data on case processing time, and the Service has not collected such data on its own. Consequently, as agreed with your office, we telephoned Food Stamp Program officials in the 50 States and the District of Columbia to obtain whatever data or estimates they could provide us on case processing time.

1/"Expedited Service in the Food Stamp Program" (CED-82-59, Mar. 15, 1982).

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We also asked for information on the number of new cases receiving expedited service to supplement the data presented in our March 1982 report.

State officials provided us with estimates of the average number of days it took to process an application or the number of days in which most applications were processed. According to officials of 31 States and the District of Columbia, regular cases are generally processed within 15 calendar days. In 8 other States, officials indicated that these cases are processed within 22 days, and in 10 States, officials told us that their records only showed that most cases were processed within 30 days as required by food stamp legislation. An Indiana official said that he could not provide information on how long it took to process regular cases in his State.

As we reported earlier, the number of households applying for food stamps under expedited service varies greatly among the States. In 34 States (including the 15 States on which we reported in March 1982) and the District of Columbia, the percentage of all new cases receiving expedited service ranged from 4 percent to 75 percent. In about half of these States and in the District, at least 25 percent of all new cases were receiving expedited service.

Food stamp officials in 19 States said that eliminating expedited service would help reduce processing time for regular cases. Officials in 30 other States and the District of Columbia said that eliminating this service would not affect the processing time for regular cases. An Indiana official could not provide information on how or whether such elimination would change processing time for regular cases.

The State-by-State responses we obtained are shown in the following tables.

States That Reported Processing Regular Cases
Within 15 Days

<u>State</u>	<u>Number of days to process regular cases</u>	<u>Percent of new cases receiving expedited service</u>	<u>Would elimination of expedited service reduce regular processing time?</u>
Alaska	15	40	Yes
Arkansas	15	20	No
California	13	(a)	Yes
Colorado	15	(a)	No
Delaware	14	75	Yes
District of Columbia	5	28	No
Florida	14	24	Yes
Hawaii	14	5	Yes
Idaho	9	44	No
Iowa	7	7	No
Kentucky	14	43	No
Louisiana	13	(a)	Yes
Maine	15	Under 10	No
Massachusetts	7	55	No
Missouri	15	15	Yes
Montana	1	(a)	No
Nebraska	14	(a)	No
Nevada	14	18	Yes
New Mexico	12	(a)	No
North Dakota	10	Under 10	No
Oklahoma	15	14	No
Oregon	7	(a)	Yes
Rhode Island	14	30	No
South Carolina	7	6	No
South Dakota	5	Under 10	No
Tennessee	12	67	No
Texas	15	60	Yes
Utah	15	40	Yes
Washington	4	25	No
West Virginia	5	(a)	No
Wisconsin	7	70	No
Wyoming	14	33	No

a/Information not available.

States That Reported Processing Regular Cases
Within 22 Days

<u>State</u>	<u>Number of days to process regular cases</u>	<u>Percent of new cases receiving expedited service</u>	<u>Would elimination of expedited service reduce regular processing time?</u>
Alabama	17	(a)	Yes
Connecticut	22	12	Yes
Georgia	21	26	Yes
Illinois	21	36	Yes
Kansas	17		No
Rural counties		35	
Urban counties		65	
Minnesota	21	24	No
New Hampshire	21	10	No
Vermont	20	4	No

a/Information not available.

States That Reported Processing Regular Cases
Within 30 Days

<u>State</u>	<u>Number of days to process regular cases</u>	<u>Percent of new cases receiving expedited service</u>	<u>Would elimination of expedited service reduce regular processing time?</u>
Arizona	Within 30 days	25	Yes
Maryland	" " "	36	No
Michigan	" " "	11	No
Mississippi	" " "	(a)	Yes
New Jersey	" " "	14	No
New York	" " "	(a)	Yes
North Carolina	" " "	(a)	No
Ohio	" " "	(a)	No
Pennsylvania	" " "	(a)	Yes
Virginia	" " "	(a)	No

a/Information not available.

NOTE: Indiana could not provide any information in response to our call; therefore, it is not listed.

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We have discussed the information in this report with your office and, as requested, we did not obtain agency comments. As arranged with your office, unless you publicly announce its contents earlier, we plan no further distribution of this report until 7 days after its issue date. At that time, we will send copies to the Secretary of Agriculture and the Director, Office of Management and Budget. We will also make copies available to others on request.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Henry Eschwege". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the typed name and title.

Henry Eschwege
Director